

POLICE/PROBATION PARTNERSHIPS AS AN OFFICER SAFETY STRATEGY

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Communities across the country are experiencing a worrisome surge in the amount of serious violence committed by youth, which is reflected in a growing rate of homicides by teenagers. Many of these communities have been searching for policies that will stem this bloody tide. The problem becomes more urgent in the face of predictions from James Fox of Northeastern University, among others, who foresees a major increase in youth violence by the end of the decade as a result of demographic trends (Fox, 1996).

In their search for weapons to employ in the effort to decrease violence, some communities have considered and some have implemented city-wide curfews. The notion is that prohibiting teenagers from being on city streets during the evening hours will deter youth violence.

Whatever the merits of city-wide curfews may be, probation agencies have traditionally employed targeted curfews as both a sanction and a strategy for deterring offenders from committing additional crimes. Typically these curfews are enforced through a combination of home visits, telephone contacts, and electronic monitoring.

As the levels and severity of youth violence escalate, probation officers charged with enforcing curfews face a new and heightened challenge in terms of officer safety. For departments that have chosen to arm their office, the concerns are perhaps not as great. However, officers who are not armed naturally hesitate to conduct home inspections—clearly the preferred enforcement strategy—in high-crime areas. According to a recent news story from the Associated Press, for example, probation officers in the state of Maine are suspending the practice of conducting home inspections until they are armed. (See the *Boston Globe*, July 30, 1996.) As a group, they feel they are not adequately equipped to ensure their own safety.

Teaming for Improved Community Presence

In late 1992, faced with the dilemma of reconciling the need for on-site curfew enforcement with legitimate safety concerns, Boston probation officers reached out to local law enforcement to help find a solution. The resulting collaboration has become known as “Operation Night Light,” which puts Boston’s probation officers together with Boston police officers to jointly enforce curfews and other geographic restrictions placed by the court on high-risk youthful offenders.

A typical evening in Night Light includes the matching of one or two probation officers with a similar crew from the Boston Police Youth Violence Strike Force. The combined team meets at Strike Force headquarters to prepare for the evening's work. The probation officers will have identified 10 to 15 probationers to see that evening, concentrating on cases thought to be "active" on the street or on offenders who have been slipping in their compliance with probation conditions.

Operating in an unmarked car and in plain clothes, the team proceeds to its first scheduled curfew check. The police officers, who are responsible for safety, will be sensitive to the manner in which the home is approached and also to exit areas, in case the probationer seeks to evade the contact. Once the security issues-which are not monumental in most cases-are addressed, the probation officer(s) approach the door and seek entry. The contact then proceeds as would any typical probationary home inspection. Every effort is made to ensure that the parents and other family members are not alarmed by the presence of probation and police officers; courtesy and a friendly manner are emphasized.

The purposes of the inspection are to ascertain whether the probationer is home in observance of the curfew, to reinforce the importance of strict observance of all conditions, and to inquire of the parents or guardians about the probationer's behavior, both in the home and in the community. After these objectives are accomplished and any other issues of concern to any of the parties are addressed, the team thanks everyone for their cooperation and goes on to the next scheduled contact.

In addition to home contacts, Night Light teams commonly stop at parks or street corners where youth are congregated. The purpose of these visits is dual: to determine whether any probationers are present, and also to demonstrate to the youth of the city that the probation and police departments are working together in the evening and are interested in the whereabouts and activities of young people on probation. We have learned that the word spreads quickly that there is a new mode of operation in probation and a new level of jeopardy for those who would ignore their probationary obligations.

Benefits and Impact of Night Light

From the probation point of view, the presence of the police makes it possible to enter the most crime-ridden areas of the city into the late evening. That is, the police provide a high degree of security for probation officers who are not armed or equipped with telecommunications capacity.

The familiarity between the police and probation departments that has grown out of Night Light has led to routine, city-wide sharing of information regarding the identities of those on probation. This means that any information obtained by a police officer concerning the activities of a probationer-whether the subject of Night Light or not-can be passed on to the probation department. While this may seem an obvious strategy, the routine exchange of information between probation and law enforcement is uncommon in most jurisdictions. This communication failure robs probation of access to the contacts and observations made by police, who are working the community on a 24-hour, 7-day-per-week basis and therefore have more "eyes and ears" on the streets than even the most proactive probation department can muster. The increased flow of information on probationer activities has been one of the most valuable by-products of Night Light.

There is a new credibility to probation supervision and the enforcement of curfews and area restrictions that was not present when probation activities were limited to the 9-to-5 time frame. Feedback from offenders, police, parents, and community members alike indicates that the kids are aware that things have changed and have become more cautious, even compliant, in their behavior. This is a breakthrough.

What difference have the more than 5,000 Night Light contacts made in the last 3 1/2 years? Although direct impact is difficult to prove with certainty, the trends in terms of declining rates of homicide and other violent crimes are encouraging. To point to some recent data, during the first 6 months of 1996, there was 1 juvenile homicide compared to 10 for the same period in 1995. Moreover, the staff involved believe strongly that improved compliance with probation and decreased levels of gang-related violence are at least partially attributable to the efforts of Night Light. Court personnel believe that probationary sentences have gained a new and enhanced credibility as a result of the stricter enforcement of key conditions that Night Light provides. It is clear now, as it has not always been in the past, that those on probation must take their obligations seriously or they will be detected in not doing so, and that negative consequences will follow. And the word is on the street.

Yet another benefit is the hard-to-measure but nevertheless teal reassurance that comes to neighborhoods in which Night Light operates. The knowledge that probation officers are around with the police ensuring that young probationers are off the streets in the evening brings a measure of relief to hard-hit communities. It is also very clear that the parents-who are often in a losing battle to keep their sons from responding to the lure of the streets-genuinely appreciate the support they receive through curfew enforcement. While this program is designed primarily to deter young offenders from committing new crimes, their parents recognize that it also serves to keep them from being victimized themselves in the mortal combat that envelops their streets.

In essence, this probation/police partnership has made curfew enforcement feasible and safe in all communities and has resulted in a collaboration that has yielded additional, collateral benefits. All parties-especially the communities-have benefited from Night Light.

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"Night Light can target community concerns. If we have a rash of shootings, drive-bys, drug dealing, community complaints, we can call the court, be it Roxbury or Dorchester Court, and make all our area checks down here. So besides the added uniform presence, drug unit, detectives, and everybody else from here, we have probation officers down there to start shaking everybody's tree too. If nothing else, it just defuses problems." **-Boston probation officer**

References

Fox, James A. 1996. *Trends in Juvenile Violence: A Report to the United States Attorney General on Current and Future Rates of Juvenile Offending*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice. ■